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ABSTRACT

A study explored the lives of families and successful readers within "at-risk" environments. This inquiry sought to identify and understand the home and family characteristics that enable children to defy the myths and become successful readers and literacy users, when individuals and institutions would suggest they would fail. Through structured interviews with children and their families, the study focused on the nature of literacy acquisition in the home as it was reflected in the success the child had demonstrated in school. This qualitative research extends the literature by revealing the intricacies of homes and families that foster children's literacy development, when conventional predictors would suggest they would fail. For the purposes of the study, student success in reading was defined as having achieved grade level or better performance on informal reading measures administered by the teacher, and economically disadvantaged was defined as having qualified to be a recipient of free or reduced lunch. Participants, six fifth-grade students, came from two low-performing elementary schools in a small Southern city where a major state university is located. Some findings are: (1) there is no identified set of conditions necessary for a child to become a successful reader; (2) children from economically disadvantaged families view reading as a skill to be shared with others; (3) progressive optimism and "high literacy press" are constructs that define the attitudes, values, and practices that families put forth to help their children become successful readers; and (4) families were able to apply progressive optimism and high literacy press to create literacy milieus for their children in spite of difficulties. (Contains 97 references.) (NKA)

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Progressive Optimism and High Literacy Press: Defeating the Deficit Notion in Economically Disadvantaged African-American Families Whose Children Are Successful Readers.

by Veda Pendleton McClain

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Progressive optimism and high literacy press: Defeating the deficit notion in economically disadvantaged African-American families whose children are successful readers

I grew up poor and African-American in the 60's and 70's in a small southern town. I realized early in life the importance of reading in getting an education. As an African-American family, we were disadvantaged economically and becoming literate was essential if we were to rise above our circumstances. Although the term "at-risk" had not yet been coined, I was just that and so were my siblings. My brothers, sister, and I grew up in a single-parent household where the income earning potential of my mother was far below the national poverty level. She walked several blocks to work as a presser in a dry cleaners every day. She had a tenth-grade education, but yet she held on to the dream that her children's education could and would go beyond that which had been available to her. Low socioeconomic status was a factor, but it did not prohibit nor inhibit our aspirations. It was not what we did not have that mattered, but what we did have. We were all blessed with intelligence and parental faith and expectations that we perform accordingly. Nothing but our best would do. The strains of poverty, the injustices of racism and our father's absence were not adequate excuses for our not reaching our human potential.

Because of my background and personal interests, this study grew out of my desire to explore the lives of families and successful readers within "at-risk" environments. Much of the literature (Baumann & Thomas,1997; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) has rejected and attempted to defeat the deficit notion of at risk children and families and that has shown that race, class, family structure, and economics do not guarantee or preclude literacy growth. This inquiry sought to identify and understand the home and family characteristics that enable children to defy the myths and become successful readers and literacy users when individuals and institutions would suggest they would fail. Through structured interviews with children and their families, this study focused on the nature of literacy acquisition in the home as it was reflected in the success the child had demonstrated in reading at school. This qualitative study extends the literature by revealing the intricacies of homes and families that foster children's literacy development when conventional predictors would suggest they would fail.

The following general question guided this investigation: What can we learn from families whose less than ideal living situations produce children who are successful readers? What is it about these families that supports the children's literacy development? Is there within the home an underlying foundation of hope and expectancy of

success in reading that propels these children? What are the activities of the home that stimulate literacy? Are there significant or powerful personalities in the home who encourage literacy?

Defeating the deficit notion

Many children come from homes where situations exist that put them at-risk of not being successful, but background circumstances are not always a good predictor of what an individual can or cannot accomplish (Baumann & Thomas,1997; Clark, 1990). Several researchers contend it is not a sociocultural issue that may make the difference in the achievement rates of the children (Auerbach, 1993; Baker, Sonnenschein, Serpell, Fernandez-Fein, and Scher, 1994; Boykin, 1984), but it is a matter of the values that families choose to incorporate into their daily lives (Baumann & Thomas, 1997; McClain & Baumann, 1996; Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995; Spiegel, 1991; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

In a study of African-American families and their children in a northern city, for example, Shields, Gordon, and Dupree (1983) found differences in the values placed on reading in the homes, differences in the literacy practices and differences in the general attitude toward reading. They concluded that when race and socioeconomic status are accounted for, parent practices made the most important contribution to their children's reading mastery.

Baumann and Thomas (1997), in a study of a low-income African-American family in a small southern city, found that the parent's literacy practices and positive attitudes about education in general made the difference in the level of competency in literacy the children were able to achieve. While the Thomas household consisted of a single mother and her three daughters, the literacy practices that Deborah, the mother, learned and chose to incorporate into her family's daily life made a tremendous difference in the reading achievement of her young daughter during second grade.

In an ethnographic study of inner-city, poor families, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) sought to find out what helped the children from these families defy the odds and succeed in reading. Although each family had many obstacles to overcome, they highly valued literacy and put forth the effort to make sure that their children became literate. Many of their literacy practices emulated those of their children's schools. These families used literacy in a variety of ways, for a variety of audiences, and in numerous situations as they attempted to survive in a world that demanded proficiency in the use of print. These families were creative and used what they had in the way of interest, attention, and sharing of knowledge to help develop their children's literacy.

While we know that students who come from families whose home circumstances place them at risk of not succeeding in reading often face difficulties in defying the odds of succeeding (Neuman, & Gallagher, 1994; Purcell-Gates, 1995), we know that many at risk students succeed in reading (Clark, 1983; Goldenberg, 1989; Heath, 1983; Irvine, 1991; Shields, Gordon, & Dupree, 1983). The root of what makes an at risk student successful in reading has yet to be fully explored. There are no detailed examples of the nature of the support for reading that families provide, particularly for middle level students.

Theoretical Framework

We know that economically disadvantaged and minority families value education, that they support their children's literacy efforts, that they view literacy as a tool for daily living, and that they view achievement in education as a means to better their lives. What we do not know is what underlies or forms the foundation of their value system and motivates the parents as individuals to strive for more in terms of literacy for their families.

The question guiding this study was: What can we learn from economically disadvantaged families whose children are successful readers? As I contemplated possible responses to this question, I was reminded of my own experiences as a reader, a student, a teacher, and an achiever. I thought about what may have been the driving force behind what I had been able to accomplish throughout my life. I thought about the hopes, dreams, goals, and aspirations that my family held for me as I grew up with more disadvantages than advantages. And I thought about what had been the outcome of all those goals. After much contemplation, I was able to articulate what had happened in my life, and possibly in those of others, and generate a theoretical construct: *progressive optimism*©. *Progressive optimism* is an attitude of hope that change in circumstances, particularly social status, can and will be made through hard and diligent work. *Progressive optimism* evokes an expectancy and spirit of achievement and success.

In literacy related issues, *progressive optimism* fuels another construct called *high literacy press*©. *High literacy press* consists of all the efforts families choose to put forth in supporting and nurturing literacy development in their children. The term press was borrowed from two different sources, both expressing the same general connotation. First, the term press was used in the New Testament of the King James Version of the Bible. The author of the Book of Luke talks about pressing in or "pressing toward the mark." In some churches, this pressing

in has been interpreted to mean that all actions, energy, and efforts are focused on one goal and that there is a push to achieve that goal.

The term press has also been used in basketball. Full court press has been used to characterize a team effort in pursuing the basketball. In a full court press, the five players on the basketball court are united in thought, efforts, and goals. They want the ball and they press toward getting the ball from the players of the opposing team. The intensity of the full court press often makes the difference in who wins or loses a game.

High literacy press is fueled by an attitude of *progressive optimism* and encompasses all of the literacy related activities families choose to incorporate into their daily lives. Families with a *high literacy press* involve their children in reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities years before they enter the halls of academic institutions. These families have identified their values and set their sights on literacy as a goal for their families. They believe that their efforts, activities, and progressive optimism will lead to success in literacy for their offspring. Parents then undertake activities that support and cultivate literacy. These families press in toward literacy (Chall, et al. 1990; Durkin, 1984; Hartle-Schutte, 1993; Snow et al., 1993; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988;).. A literacy press is based on a general attitude of *progressive optimism* with respect to time, attention, sensitivity, and resources invested in literate activities.

Families with a *high literacy press* help their children by incorporating literate activities into their daily lives (Auerbach, 1995). Children in these families soon realize that becoming literate is an important part of their own personal growth and achievement and that through partaking of these activities, they find meaning in their own lives. For children in these families, becoming literate is not a process that is confined to the walls of an educational institution. It is an important part of their everyday lives and in all that they do. A *high literacy press* moves and motivates the children to want to succeed in their efforts to become literate. Children can and will achieve literate success regardless of race, social class, marital status of the head of the household, socioeconomic status, or even cultural differences.

Progressive optimism and *high literacy press* were my "hunches" (Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1996) or "little theories" (Wolcott, 1992) as I proceeded with this inquiry as to what may have helped children of economically disadvantaged families succeed in reading. They were the constructs and labels that I assigned to my own real life experiences. In this study, I sought to find out from the families that I interviewed whether the

constructs of *progressive optimism* and *high literacy press* helped explain why their children became successful readers. Using a phenomenological lens, the perspectives of parents and children were critical to understanding the literacy successes of children from low-income families.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to identify and understand the home and family lives of these individual families and the characteristics that have helped their children become successful readers. For the purposes of this study, student success in reading was defined as having achieved grade level or better performance on informal reading measures administered by the teacher, and economically disadvantaged was defined as having qualified to be a recipient of free or reduced lunch.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach (Patton 1990) was employed in conducting this investigation to answer my primary research question. Because the nature of qualitative research methods provides flexibility while examining meaning in context (Merriam, 1988), diversity in family experiences and the dynamics of family life can be explored without a disruption in the ways in which families create and maintain their own realities. This study was designed to examine the events holistically, looking at the components in order to better understand the whole (Merriam, 1988). The individual and collective phenomenological life experiences of family members can be investigated through the use of qualitative methods (Hycner, 1985).

Phenomenology was the theoretical perspective that formed the foundation for this study. Studying the lived experience is the goal of phenomenology (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology involves uncovering and describing the essence of the structures of situations as people live them. Families create and share their own meanings for their lives. To be consistent with this theoretical perspective, a phenomenological data analysis method adapted from Hycner's procedures for analyzing interview data was used in this study (Hycner, 1985). A case study design (Merriam, 1988) was used to complement the phenomenological framework because case studies are detailed and, according to Merriam (p. 16), provide a "holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit." The unit of analysis in this study was the family.

Context of the Study

The study was conducted in Amity, a small Southern city where a major state university is located. The Drew County School District serves Amity. Participants for the study came from Harding Avenue and Indiana Street Schools. These schools were chosen for this study because they have consistently shown some of the lowest test scores in the district on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (Hoover, Hieronymus, Frisbie, & Dunbar, 1993). Harding Avenue School had the lowest reading and mathematics test scores in both third and fifth grades in the district for the 1995-96 school year. The test scores for Indiana Street School for that same year were the third lowest out of the 13 elementary schools in the district.

Harding Avenue School

The Harding Avenue community is located in the northern part of the town and is largely African American. The community is made up of poor and working class families, many of whom work in local factories and poultry plants or have menial jobs at the university. Many of the families live in duplex apartments, subsidized housing projects, or mobile homes. The families and children deal with poverty, child abuse and neglect, drug and alcohol abuse, crime, abandonment, teenage pregnancies, and broken homes.

Harding Avenue Elementary School is located in this community. Children are bused from other areas in the northern part of the town to the school. The racial make-up of the school is approximately 72% African American, 24% European American, and 1% Hispanic American. Harding Avenue School was recently cited as one of the schools in the district that did not comply with the district's plan to racially balance school populations. The school population remains predominantly African-American and impoverished. Eighty-two percent of the children receive free or reduced lunch.

Indiana Street School

Indiana Street School is located in the western part of the county in an upper-middle-class neighborhood. Enrollment at the school is approximately 300. The racial make up of Indiana Street School is 60% African American, 34% European American, and 19% other minority populations, including Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. About 60% of the children receive free or reduced lunch. Because of the district's attendance plan, many of the students who attend Indiana Street School are bused from other parts of the county from neighborhoods in which they too encounter much of what goes on in the Harding Avenue community. The

participants in this study live in neighborhoods called Allendale and Oxford Valley. Many of the children live in subdivisions near commercial areas where the racial make-up of the neighborhoods is mixed. Problems of abuse and neglect as well as drug-trafficking plague these neighborhoods also.

Participants

Participants were six fifth-grade students at Harding Avenue and Indiana Street Elementary Schools and their families. Family participation was solicited once the children were identified. Fifth-grade students were chosen for several reasons. First, by the time students reach the fifth grade, their reading competency is stabilized. Second, fifth-grade students are generally mature enough to answer questions about their reading experiences. If students have demonstrated a certain degree of success in reading by fifth grade, then there is a likelihood of long-term success in reading. Finally, fifth grade is also the end of a student's elementary school career. It is the recommendation of the fifth-grade classroom teacher that determines the student's academic placement for middle school.

The Children

Using criterion sampling (Patton, 1990), teachers at Harding Avenue and Indiana Street Elementary Schools were asked to identify those students who were both (a) successful readers (instructional reading level at or above grade level placement) according to recent scores on the Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) (Burns & Roe, 1993); and (b) economically disadvantaged (students who qualified for or received reduced or free lunch). Drew County teachers had recently begun to use the IRI (Burns & Roe, 1993) to assess the reading levels of the students. Students achieving an instructional reading level of grade five or higher on the IRI were included in the potential participant pool.

Twelve students from both schools met both the reading achievement and economic criteria. Six students and their parents or caregivers agreed to participate in the study. All students were 11 years old. Four were female and two were male and came from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds. Three students each came from Ms. James' and Ms. Harding's classrooms. All of the families were African American. The teachers were able to identify the students who qualified to receive free or reduced lunches based on information gained from the previous year.

The Families

The families who participated in this study differed in significant ways. While all were poor and African American, each family's story was unique. For the purposes of this paper, the following section provides a brief overview of two families whose cases will be explored.

The Coleman family. Ms. Coleman and her daughter, Lisa, also lived in the Allendale community. Ms. Coleman was a single parent and she did not work. She had a disability and as a result received a Supplemental Security Income check each month. She had an older daughter who lived in a housing project with her own baby. This family also experienced the tragic loss of a son. Several years ago, Ms. Coleman's then six-year-old son drowned in a lake at a park.

The Colemans had no telephone or car. Lisa made telephone calls when necessary from neighbors' telephones when they were at home and agreeable to let her use their phones. Lisa also made arrangements for her and her mother to get transportation to places like the grocery store, Wal-Mart, and school programs held at night. Handling bills and food stamps were also Lisa's responsibility. Lisa's teacher believed that she scored so highly on her reading inventory because she handled all of the printed matter for the family.

The Bryant and Johnson families. Drecus Johnson lived with the Bryant family in foster care. He had lived with the Bryant family for three years, after having been in several foster homes and having lived with his maternal grandmother. His parents had been substance abusers. His father died when he was in second grade, and his mother was serving a sentence in a county jail for drug-related crimes during the course of this study.

Drecus had a history of emotional problems stemming from all of the changes in his life as well as a personal tragedy. He spent time daily in the behavior disorder class at his school. While the focus had been on his behavior, his teacher reported that he was a good reader. Fifth grade had been a good experience for him.

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

The data collected in this study came from several different sources. The primary data source was interviews with the student participants and one of their parents or caregivers. A second data source was field notes which included comments on interactions with school personnel. My research journal that I kept throughout the study was a third and final data source.

Interviews

Two interviews were conducted with each student and with each parent or caregiver. The bulk of the interview data was collected during the first interview with each participant. Second interviews were for clarification, elaboration, corroboration, and extension of data obtained from the first interviews. Students were interviewed first and parent interviews followed so that the parents did not have the opportunity to discuss the content of any of the questions with the children before they were interviewed.

The student interviews. Interviews with the students focused on the students' experiences learning to read. These interviews lasted 15 to 30 minutes depending on the level of detail children provided and their articulateness.

Working from an interview guide (see Appendix A) during the interview, I asked students a set of 17 questions that enabled me to gain insight into the nature of their reading growth and development as nurtured and supported in their home environments. These questions were designed to address my elaborated research questions, which inquired about the activities, persons, and values that may have influenced these preadolescents' development as readers. Following the questions, students were invited to add anything they wished about themselves as readers or about their families and reading.

The student interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. After reading and studying these transcripts, I determined which questions from the first interviews required extension or elaboration and which questions I had failed to ask them entirely. I then created an interview guide for the second student interviews that included four questions I asked of each child along with child-specific questions (see Appendix A).

Data saturation per child was reached during the second interview. Most of the responses that the students gave during the second interview duplicated those given during the first interview. When I asked for clarification on some of the questions, I was given the same answers.

At the end of the second interview, I conducted a member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), asking students to read the transcripts of the first interview. I told them that I wanted to make sure I got everything right. As they read the transcripts, they remarked that the text was verbatim. One student said, "Gah-lee, you even got the 'ems' and 'uhs' in there. How'd you do that?"

The parents interviews. With one exception, parent interviews, which were conducted in their homes. The first parent interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes. I began by explaining to them the purpose of my study. I also told

them that I had already interviewed their children at school. Because I had not yet met five of the six parents, I spent time just getting to know them by chatting and asking questions that would give me a glimpse into their lives. I also used that time helping them become comfortable with me in their homes.

Using a 10-item interview guide parallel to the student interviews (See Appendix B), I asked parents to describe the types of things they and other family members had done at home with their children to encourage and support their interests and success in reading. The questions were designed to elicit responses that would answer my three specific questions about the persons, values, and activities that helped shape the reading development of these students.

Parent interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. After reviewing these transcripts, I determined that I needed responses to questions that would uncover the essence of what learning to read had been like for each child who participated in the study and what it was like having such a child in the home. I also wanted parents to discuss ways in which they had helped their children with reading and to offer suggestions for other parents. I then created a second interview guide for the parents (See Appendix B).

Field notes

I took field notes during all interviews. These complemented the audio tapes of the first interviews and served as the source of my written reconstruction for the second interviews which were not audiotaped. As participants responded to my questions, I wrote notes about what they said, often including quotes. I also wrote information about interviewees' appearance, their body language, and how they interacted with those who came and went during the interview. I described the participant in as much detail as possible. Notes were also made about the home and how the participant and other family members present for the interview interacted. Comments from teachers, teacher aides, and administrators became part of my field notes as they shared their knowledge of the students with me.

Research Journal

I kept a journal as I reflected and responded to the actions and events that took place. Notes were generally written immediately after the interview was completed. At other times, notes were made while driving down the street, in church, at the baseball park, or while in unrelated meetings. Once the notes were written, I reread them and made memos about the interview in terms of what happened, how the interview went, and what I thought I needed to

do differently. It was in my journal that I wrote about my feelings toward the families and what was going on. I also made notes about how I thought the study was progressing and the changes I would need to make as the study unfolded. Diagrams of what I thought were emerging themes and how they were interrelated were included in my journal. These sources served as sources of information as I began data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with the first student interview and has continued throughout the course of this study. Because the theoretical perspective for conducting this investigation was phenomenology, a phenomenological data analysis method was used. Hycner's (1985) method of analyzing phenomenological interview data was used as a guide for data analysis. This method allows for the continued delineation of data throughout the analysis process.

Data analysis occurred in three phases. Phase I procedures consisted of within-case analyses of the data for each family and the identification of emerging themes. A cross-case analysis occurred in Phase II in which similarities and differences in themes for the families were examined. Phase III consisted of an audit of the analyses. What follows are the steps that I chose to incorporate in my data analysis procedures.

First, case folders that included all data gathered on each family were assembled. All data sources were then read and reread looking for consistencies in what each individual reported about the child's success in reading. Data were annotated and bracketed according to which specific question was addressed. Next, narratives were written about each family. These narratives served as examples of what van Manen (1990) called "practical theorizing." Preliminary themes were then mined (van Manen, 1990; Kvale, 1996) from the narratives. Finally, I returned to the data sources to substantiate, triangulate, and corroborate themes. Themes that could not be substantiated by the data set were eliminated.

Phase II analysis involved cross-case analysis and consisted of four steps. These steps involved two subphases: (a) cases were examined for common themes, which led to the creation of theme categories that described the literacy experiences, acts, and values that generalized across several families. (b) Themes were examined again to identify family patterns which characterized the ways low-income, African-American families supported their children's literacy development. Finally, I returned to the data to substantiate, triangulate, and corroborate the categories and patterns.

Phase III of the analysis process involved and audit to evaluate the trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The auditor was a doctoral candidate who was trained in qualitative research methods. Using questions adapted from Schwandt and Halpern (1988), the auditor was asked to verify emerging themes for two families during Phase II. The auditor was given four focus questions to use as he reviewed the cases: (a) Can the themes identified for each family be traced back to the data? (b) Were all the data sources used in developing the themes? (c) Was there a triangulation of data sources? (d) Are the interpretations consistent with the data for each family?

The auditor was provided with the case folders for these families, which included all of the data sources for each family, and asked to evaluate whether the themes I had constructed could be found in the data. The auditor concluded that there was indeed evidence in the data for the themes that had emerged.

Results

This section describes what we can learn from economically disadvantaged families whose children are successful readers. For the purposes of this paper, the stories of two families are presented. Background information is given as well as the themes that emerged for the family. These families were chosen because of the extreme adverse conditions that the children and parents/caregivers had to work to overcome in order for the child to become a successful reader.

The Bryant/Johnson Family

Background. Drecus Johnson had been in foster care for several years. He had been with the Bryant family for three years. It seemed to have been a good and stable environment for him. Mrs. Bryant was a seamstress at a local men's garment factory. She was also an ordained minister and co-pastor at a local pentecostal church. Mr. Bryant owned a plumbing business that kept him busy and away from home. Drecus qualified to participate in this study because as a ward of the state, he did receive free lunch at school.

Carol Brooks and Josh Johnson were his natural parents. He had four siblings. The children had all been in and out of foster care because of the problems their mother had experienced with drug abuse. According to his maternal grandmother, Rose Brooks, his mother would leave the five children alone in their home for weeks at a time without adequate provisions trying to satisfy her own need for drugs. During the course of this study, Carol Brooks was incarcerated in a neighboring county jail for drug-related crimes.

Mr. Johnson had also been a substance abuser. He was an alcoholic and had died of liver disease when Drecus was in second grade. He had often come up from Florida to visit his son and bring him gifts. His death had been a tragic loss for Drecus. Mrs. Brooks reported that Drecus and his dad had been "crazy" about each other.

During one of the times when his mother had abandoned the children, his grandmother had come to Amity for a vacation. It was during that visit that she found out how her grandchildren were living. She then decided to stay in Amity and try to take care of her grandchildren. Because of the neglect and abuse that the children had lived with, they were filled with anger and fought each other constantly. Drecus had even cursed his grandmother. That was the last straw for her. Three of the children were placed in foster care. Drecus was placed in several foster homes before he ended up at the Bryant's home. While staying at one foster home, he was physically abused on the vacated school grounds where he played without adult supervision. Later, he was removed from that home.

Drecus spent an hour a day in the behavior disorder classroom at school as an emotionally disturbed student. Over the years, he had a lot of problems at school. He found it difficult coping both in and outside of the classroom. He had shown a vast improvement this year in his behavior and demeanor. He had calmed down and according to his teacher did not seem to have nearly as many problems as in past years. In explaining why he had changed to a teaching assistant, he said, "I'm saved." He was referring to the fact that he had recently become a Christian.

Although he had been with the Bryant family for three years, his grandmother became a key informant in retrospectively discussing his literacy development. Mrs. Brooks worked the night shift as a registered nurse at a local hospital. She had gone back to school in the 1980's and become a registered nurse. She lived in a mobile home in the Harding Avenue community. Working class families lived in the trailer community, but recently a lot of drug trafficking had taken place.

Based on the information reviewed in the within-case analysis for the Bryant/Johnson family, several themes emerged.

Theme 1: Drecus was able to overcome many family and personal obstacles in learning how to read. Drecus was a successful reader in spite of the many obstacles he had to overcome in his young life. His family situation did not dictate what his academic outcome would be. While not having a traditional home environment, he had been able to find a way to become successful in school. His grandmother had served as a great resource in helping him learn to read. She worked to help him become successful while dealing with all sorts of tragedies

(mother's abandonment and drug habits, father's death, personal abuse) that were going on in his life. Though difficult and frustrating for both of them, she was able to help him focus on the one thing that he could change, and that was his reading ability. She met him at his point of need and equipped him with a tool that he could use to better his own life. Mrs. Brooks put it this way:

> He would cry. He would try to duck it. He'd get angry. And what you just sit him down and try to get to him. It takes a while. There was all these things that was going on in his life. It's hard to pin somebody down. It was hard though. It was one of the roughest things I ever do, trying to help somebody.

Drecus admitted that learning to read was difficult for him. He said, "It was hard at first, but I kept on reading and got better."

Theme 2: His grandmother valued and enjoyed reading and pushed Drecus to read. Mrs. Brooks was the one who made the difference in reading for Drecus. She loved reading as a child and even said it was her world when growing up. She said reading was important to everybody and that a person could learn about other people, cultures, and governments through the pleasures gained from reading books. She continued reading for pleasure as an adult. Her values for reading ran deep. She said, "Reading is very important to my family. Always has been. Always will be."

Mrs. Brooks started Drecus out reading what she called "simple little picture books". She would record him reading and play it back to him over and over until he read it with some rhythm to it. She explained it this way.

> He likes to watch t.v. And he get mad at me when I cut the t.v. off. I say, ok, it's time to get to know the books. Because I've got books in the closet. I used to read a lot. And he get mad. I guess that's why he was looking at the spot on the wall when I was trying to read to him and trying to get him interested in books. He wanted to watch t.v. I would get little books, simple books for him to read to me. I'd turn my tape on. I'd let him read. And then I'd let him listen to it. And I'd have to correct him. (I'd say)... Is it because you don't know the words ...or what? He'd get all frustrated and crying and stuff. So we'd do it again. Over and over and over until it would sound like it had some rhythm to it when he read.

In spite of everything that was going on in this child's life, his grandmother pressed in toward literacy with and for him.

Drecus's values for reading were similar to those of his grandmother's. During his interviews, he talked about how he kept on trying to read and "got better and better." He also showed how he felt about reading and valued it when he said, "It (reading) opened up a new world for me. Like some people say, you can go around the world in one book." Drecus also talked about how he could do more in life because he was a good reader and about how life

was more interesting because of his reading. He found pleasure in reading magazines and by thumbing through certain mail order catalogs. He said he preferred reading over going outside and riding his bicycle.

Drecus also saw a practical side to reading. He believed that knowing how to read was essential for completing every day tasks such as reading signs and knowing how to manage your own personal affairs. In talking about what he can do because he is a good reader, he said:

> **Drecus**: You can do more in life if you know how to read.
> **Author:** Like what?
> **Drecus**: It's more interesting to be able to read. Be a very good reader. Because you can find out more information like in a dictionary or something. If I was not able to read, um, it wouldn't be fun because you wouldn't be able to read magazines, find directions very easily, have to ask a lot of times, and you'd have to ask people what words are, or ask somebody to read you words in a dictionary.

Drecus valued having time and a quiet environment for reading. He said that was what had helped him most in his present home environment. He expressed a desire to have someone read with him now on a regular basis because he said that a person "could help with a lot of words cause all words you can't sound out." A person is the actual resource that he would like to have to help him make even more gains in reading.

During the first interview, Drecus talked about how his parents helped him with reading. It was during the second interview that he opened up and admitted that his grandmother had helped him "a whole bunch" with reading. He then retold the same story about having had to read into a tape recorder over and over. He even remembered the title of the children's book that he had to read over and over on the tape. It was 100 Pails of Water. He said that his grandmother had also provided him with other resources such as magazines, other children's books, and trips to the library.

Theme 3: Structure and persistence in providing help in reading made a difference in his reading achievement. Although Mrs. Brooks acknowledged the fact that Drecus was greatly preoccupied with thoughts about all of the stuff that was going on in his life, she insisted that he work hard and continue to try. Drecus disliked structure or "being pinned down" to complete a task. Mrs. Brooks said that when helping him with reading, he would get frustrated and say, "I can't do this." She said that she would let him stop for a while and then they would go back to it. She said that he was always in a hurry and did not want to slow down or settle down to read. She said that it seemed as if he resented structure and adjusting to structure was difficult for him. Mrs. Brooks went on to say that she believed that the lack of structure had been what had caused so many children to fail. She saw her

persistence with Drecus as the key element in helping him learn to read and make academic gains in school. In my journal, I wrote, "An example of what I call a high literacy press. Nothing (not even himself) was allowed to get in the way of learning to read."

Theme 4: Success in reading was necessary in order for Drecus to obtain his career goals. Reading was seen as directly related to the type of job Drecus might be able to get. Both caregivers mentioned how reading would affect his job choices. Mrs. Bryant talked about how being able to read would affect how he would read and understand notices and various other paperwork on the job. She said:

> He could get a job and wouldn't have to work in no factory if he really knows how to read and he'll pay attention and everything and get a good job. If he didn't, it'd be hard for him to read, you know, when they send paper around in the plants and things when they read. It would discourage him because he wouldn't know how to read it.

Mrs. Bryant and Mrs. Brooks held high aspirations for Drecus. They were both aware of the career goal of becoming a judge that Drecus had set for himself. Mrs. Brooks said, "If he gets a little bit more patient, he wants to be a lawyer. He might could be a lawyer if he got a, you know, if he becomes a little more patient." Mrs. Bryant said that he has really got to know how to read if he wants to become a lawyer and then a judge.

Making gains in reading was serving as a bridge to help Drecus change the course of his life. Mrs. Brooks stated that she had told Drecus and his siblings that their past lives could "be either a bridge or a ditch" for them and that it was up to them to make the choice. She saw becoming a successful reader as a way for her grandchildren to achieve what their mother had not been able to achieve. His grandmother helped him press toward literacy so that he could see the possibilities of a better life through reading and making academic gains. Reading was viewed as a way out for Drecus and his family. It was the road to a better and brighter future.

Mrs. Brooks' own personal gains played a part in how she saw gains that Drecus might be able to make in his life. She had begun her nursing career as a nurse's assistant in 1955. Later, she went to school to become a licensed practical nurse and returned to school again in 1980 to become a registered nurse. She valued learning and saw it as a tool to make her own personal advances and change her socioeconomic status. Her success was proof enough about the value of reading and making academic gains. She said that reading was her world and that she could go any place and do anything through reading. Those same thoughts and feelings were what she worked so hard to pass on to Drecus. In my notes, I wrote, "Reading valued by grandmama which goes back to her childhood.

Does this have anything to do with what she has been able to accomplish? Certainly has a lot to do with how she insisted on Drecus learning how to read."

Theme 5: Outside activities and events served as enhancers of his reading ability. Drecus was able to identify non-school related activities that helped him with reading and tell how those activities helped him become a better reader. He was tuned in to reading and the many different ways in which it was used in his life.

Drecus had a small personal library, but was able to discuss the importance of the use of the public library in helping his reading. He talked about his participation in summer reading programs at the library and mentioned the awards he had received for his participation and achievement. He also talked about his participation in other outside activities such as Bible study at church, community programs, and athletic events. He and Mrs. Bryant agreed that Bible study had helped with his ability to sound out words. Drecus participated in sports year around. He believed that participating in sports and sporting events even helped enhance his reading skills. He said, "I had to know how to read the plays."

Mrs. Brooks also discussed the value of taking Drecus and his brothers and sisters to different activities. She wanted them to be exposed to activities and places that would enhance their learning. She said that she sacrificed her own rest time to take them to different places. She laughed when she talked about how she fell asleep in the movie theater and the children had to wake her up at the end of the movie. She said she took them to places such as the zoo, state parks, the African-American Heritage Library in Madison, and the State Botanical Garden. She said, "I took them places where I thought they could learn something."

Theme 6: The caregivers in this family believed adult participation was key to a child's reading success. Throughout both interviews, Mrs. Brooks talked about the importance of having an adult work with a child at home in order to help the child become a successful reader. She believed that the hard work she had put in with Drecus had paid off and he was reaping good benefits from that effort. When making recommendations to parents of less successful readers, she said, "Spend time with em. Read with em. For God's sake, take em to the library. Take special timeout for reading every day. For God's sake take em places." She said that a lot of parents do not follow through with the children when they get home. She said her own grandchildren would come home and complain about the work they were assigned and say that the teachers just did not like them. She said she would tell them,

"Don't even go there," and make them sit down and do their homework anyway. She said she thought it was ridiculous for children to think that a teacher would single them out as someone to dislike.

The Coleman Family

Background. Ms. Coleman was a single mother. Because of a disability, she did not work outside the home on a regular basis. Occasionally, she would work as part of a cleaning crew for a privately owned cleaning company that cleaned office buildings at night. She received a disability check as well as other forms of public assistance to take care of her family's needs. Ms. Coleman graduated from high school but could not read. She said she graduated in 1975 and her cap and gown picture was on the wall. Ms. Coleman also spoke in a dialect. The Coleman family was the only family in the study in which there was only one child living in the home. Ms. Coleman and Lisa interacted as if they were friends and there seemed to have been an understood sharing of the power in their relationship.

Before my first visit to the Coleman home, Ms. Wilson had warned me about the family and about what I might learn. She told me that Ms. Coleman was illiterate and that there was a lot that she would not understand when talking with me. She told me that Ms. Coleman had not come to school for the parent-teacher conference during the fall, but had offered to have a conference with her one afternoon while they were shopping in a Wal-Mart store. Ms. Wilson went on to say that Lisa, who participated in the study, was in charge of the family's business affairs when out in public. Lisa handled all of the money and food stamps for the household because Ms. Coleman could not do it herself. Ms. Wilson also said that because Lisa wanted to participate in the study, she had taught her mother how to and where to sign her name on the consent form. Lisa handled all of the printed matter for the household. Ms. Wilson said that the family was very poor and that because the family did not have a telephone or a car, I would have to go by the family home to arrange for an interview.

I arrived for my first visit soon after Lisa got off the school bus. Because I had already completed one interview with her, she welcomed me in. Her mother sat on the couch and smiled. I began to ask Ms. Coleman about a time that would be convenient for me to come by and talk with her about Lisa's reading. While she did not respond to me, she turned and looked at Lisa and asked, "What books you been readin' at school?" Lisa tried to clarify my question for her mother. She said, "Mama, I read a lot of different books at school, but she wants to

know when she can talk to you about me and reading." Ms. Coleman simply mumbled which I later found out she did a lot. Lisa turned to me and scheduled a time when she would be at home for the interview.

When I arrived for the first interview, Lisa had on her rollerblades and was on her way out the door. When she saw me, she told her mother I had arrived and came back inside the house to participate in the interview. Lisa sat on the couch between me and her mother. As I realized what was about to happen, I tried to get Ms. Coleman to answer my questions by calling her by name before I posed a question. Although I addressed Ms. Coleman directly, she would mumble something to Lisa, almost as if in code, to let Lisa know that she should respond to the question. Lisa answered all of the questions except for the question concerning the type of job her mother thought she could get because of her success in reading. Ms. Coleman was proud to say that she thought Lisa would become a doctor like Dr. Smith, a popular local pediatrician. In my notes, I wrote, "Mom is smart enough to know that doctors live and not merely survive. They enjoy life. That's what she wants for her daughter. High aspirations."

Lisa was a good student. She described herself as "a very good reader." She said that she was a very good reader because she read a lot when she was at home. According to her teacher, she was diligent about completing and turning in her assignments. Lisa was considered to be a good 'B' student. Ms. Wilson and her student teacher were proud of Lisa's informal reading inventory score. Ms. Wilson said, "She can read anything cause she handles everything at her house." She said that Lisa was really protective of her mother and had decided to not go on the fifth grade overnight trip because she was concerned about what might happen to her mother while she was away. Lisa vocalized that same sentiment when talking about her future schooling. She said she wanted to go to college, but as she put it, "I don't like staying at places. Do you have to stay at college when you go?" In response to her question, I told her that she did not have to stay. She could go to the local university and come home every night.

On the basis of the with-in case analysis process, these themes emerged from the data for the Coleman family, which are presented in the following subsections.

Theme 1: Ms. Coleman's low literacy did not preclude Lisa's becoming literate. Ms. Coleman has low literacy skills. She could not handle basic responsibilities that required minimum reading skills. For instance, she did not know how to complete an enrollment form for middle school for Lisa or how to complete her food stamp recertification form. Both forms required basic self-identification information such as name, address, and telephone number. During the course of the study, I completed both of those for her at her request. Ms. Coleman's low

literacy level did not stand in the way of Lisa's reading success. Even though her mother could not read on a basic level, Lisa was one of the top readers in her class. According to Ms. Wilson, Lisa learned as much as she could and tried to teach it to her mother. While Lisa did not grow up hearing her mother read stories to her every night, she learned how to read and how to read well.

Ms. Coleman's literacy level had nothing to do with the achievement level that her daughter had been able to attain. Both mother and daughter seemed to have valued literacy and literacy-related activities. They both recognized and acknowledged the importance of Lisa's literacy abilities for the well-being of the family.

Theme 2: Ms. Coleman's value for literacy resulted in her pushing Lisa toward literacy. While Ms. Coleman recognized her own personal limitations, she realized that Lisa was capable of achieving much more. Therefore, she pushed Lisa to make gains in acquiring literacy. She saw the gains that Lisa made in literacy as gains for both of them. Ms. Coleman was helped because of Lisa's skills and Lisa performed well in school because of her skills.

Ms. Coleman encouraged Lisa's literacy by rewarding her for her efforts in reading. When speaking of how she was rewarded for doing well in reading, Lisa said, "She tells me when I get to, like when we go to the store, she'll buy me a new chapter book to read." Lisa said that her mother also gave her money at times to buy books at the school book fair and that the books in her personal library she received as gifts either on her birthday or other special occasions. She said, "Mostly what I want is books." When I questioned her as to why she wanted books, she said, "To help me read more."

Ms. Coleman also tried to make sure Lisa used the public library. Lisa said that she went sometimes, but at other times she could not because as she said, "We don't get a way around [referring to a lack of transportation]." At times when transportation is available, Lisa said, "She tells me when we have to go for a long ride, she tells me I have to take some books with me." Lisa also said that her mother listened to her read at night and that she always read her homework to her mother. In speaking of the help she received from her mother, Lisa said, "She told me to read her one chapter a day or night so I can help my reading."

Theme 3: Reading was a survival tool for the Coleman family. The Coleman family read to survive. Lisa's ability to read and understand the various papers and documents had a lot to do with how well the family got along in daily affairs. Reading helped the family make it. The general welfare of the family depended largely on

Lisa's ability to understand the printed matter that came into their household. Reading tasks focused on making it through every day tasks like going grocery shopping, reading labels on products, and reading papers that Lisa brought home from school. When asked about the types of things she could do because she was a successful reader, Lisa responded, " I can read like when we go shopping. I can help my mother find what she is looking for." When asked what it was like having a successful reader in her home, Ms. Coleman said, "She read me paper she brang home from school. She hep me when we go to stoe [store]."

> As I stated earlier, this seemingly reversed parent-child relationship troubled me. In my journal, I wrote:
>
> Although neither child nor parent views reading or education in general with the lens that I do, they see enough to know that reading success is critical to their success in surviving. Therefore, they press in toward reading and the acquisition of literacy-related skills.

Theme 4: Limited family resources did not inhibit Lisa's development as a reader. A lack of resources was not an inhibitor of Lisa's reading success or success in school. Living without adequate financial resources, without a telephone, and without transportation, was not a burden that prohibited Lisa's success in reading. The lack of resources had nothing to do with reading and writing for this family. Ms. Coleman took what resources she had and provided reading materials for Lisa. The focus for the family seemed to have been on what they did have and not on what they did not have.

Theme 5: Ms. Coleman's recognition of her own limited abilities served as a stepping stone for helping to make a difference in Lisa's life. While much of the literature on literacy development discusses family values for literacy making the difference in a child's reading success, there is usually a literate adult in the home who encourages the child to become successful in reading. That was not the case with this family. While Ms. Coleman was illiterate, she was aware of some of what her daughter needed to be successful in school and in life. She said that her older daughter had not been a good student and had gotten with the wrong crowd at school. She said, "She won't smart like Pea-eye [her nickname for Lisa]." Ms. Coleman pushed Lisa because she recognized her own personal limitations in reading.

Ms. Coleman also recognized her limitations in oral expression. During the first parent interview, Lisa answered almost all of the questions for her mother. Lisa explained that her mother did not like the way she sounded on tape. Ms. Coleman simply mumbled or motioned to Lisa for her to respond. In responding, Lisa was articulate

and responded like she thought an adult would respond to my interview questions. She made every effort to show her mother in a positive light. This ability to think and respond appropriately showed social as well as verbal maturity on Lisa's part. She had learned how to take on a role that by 'tradition' would have been done by her mother. It was almost as if she served as a translator.

Theme 6: Lisa's family responsibilities promoted her literacy. Placing some household responsibilities on a child has its merits. While taking care of a household in terms of managing the money, food stamps, etc., was an awesome task for an 11 year -old child, it served as a learning enhancement for Lisa. Lisa's reading ability was greatly enhanced because of the responsibility that was placed on her in caring for her family. On a daily basis, she had to comprehend text on a variety of levels and interpret the meaning of the text for her family. From that point, she had to help her mother understand the text and help her make decisions that would be in the best interest of the family. It was a unique partnership. Lisa used her literacy skills, while her mother used her common sense gained through experience to help guide the course of the family. That partnership worked for them at home and worked for Lisa at school.

Major Findings

The question guiding this study was, What can we learn from economically disadvantaged families whose children are successful readers? In response to this question, the data revealed that there are six major findings related to the literacy successes of these children and families. The findings are as follows:

* There is no identified set of conditions necessary for a child to become a successful reader. While success in reading was defined as reading on or above grade level according to a score obtained on an informal reading inventory, each child achieved success under a different set of conditions. Those conditions were as unique to each family as was the genetic makeup of their physical bodies. It was the combination of all the factors of their environments that helped them achieve success in reading.

* As Shields, Gordon, & Dupree (1983) found, when race and socioeconomic status are shrouded, minority and poor children possess the same values and goals as children of other races and economic groups. Parents of poor and minority children also hold similar values and have high aspirations for their children. The parents are just as willing to take part in the education processes of their children as other parents. What makes the difference for these families is how they go about translating their values and goals into reality for their children.

* Children from economically disadvantaged families view reading as a skill that is to be shared with others. The acquisition of literacy is more communal in nature for the children and their families. As expressed by the children in this study, they saw sharing reading as part of their responsibility as a successful reader. While the adult caregivers initially shared reading with them, it was not enough for them to simply possess the skill. They felt a need to aid in the literacy development of others.

* Progressive optimism and high literacy press are constructs that help define the attitudes, values and practices that families put forth to help their children become successful readers. Progressive optimism is attitudinal. High literacy press has to do with practice. Progressive optimism applied to reading becomes a high literacy press.

* Economically disadvantaged successful readers are much like many other successful readers. They practice reading. Time spent engaged in reading is important. Children in these families read for functional purposes as well as for pleasure. Reading had many uses and purposes for these children and their families.

* The families were able to apply progressive optimism and high literacy press to create literacy milieus for their children in spite of personal difficulties. Although the milieu differed within each household and may or may not have included the traditional reading activities, the children were successful readers.

These findings are representative of the nature of this study, the participants, and the researcher. They provide some answers about successful readers from economically disadvantaged families.

Discussion

The discussion as presented here relates the findings to theory and concepts in the field of literacy education. First, I discuss the study in relation to the extant research in our field. Second, I discuss findings in relation to the little theories or hunches I put forward in this paper.

Extant Research

In this section of the discussion, I present the findings of this study in relation to the theoretical and empirical findings in the literature. The findings are related to each family and how they managed their lives.

Caregiver valued literacy with press. The parents in this study played a major role in their children's literacy development (Goldenberg, 1989). These individuals offered encouragement or motivation for their child to do well in reading. The person may have also shared household resources with the child in order to enhance the child's ongoing literacy development. Because parents and caregivers are our first literacy teachers (Morrow, 1995; Nuckolls, 1991; Rucinski & Kries, 1991), and the teachers with whom children spend the most time, it is important that a parent or caregiver values literacy in order for a child to become successful in reading (Sonnenschien, Brody, & Munsterman, 1996). For the families who participated in this study, there was a caregiver in each family who valued literacy. Although all of the families were economically disadvantaged and African American, the findings were in agreement with those of Shields, Gordon, and Dupree (1983). They found that when race and socioeconomic status are accounted for, parent practices made the most important contribution to their children's reading development. While the families in this study shared a common value for literacy, the dimensions of that value for

literacy varied from family to family depending on the family history as well as how the family viewed literacy and its role or function in their lives. The following summaries give the phenomenological perspectives of each family with regard to the caregivers who valued literacy and their reasons for valuing it.

Ms. Coleman was keenly aware of her own struggles with reading. Ms. Coleman was not able to read to Lisa as has been suggested by the literature (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Hill, 1989, Morrow, 1993; Trelease, 1995) as essential in promoting a child's literacy development. While she knew that she was not capable of handling her own household affairs as they related to reading and involvement with print, she made sure that Lisa would not grow up having to struggle with the same issues. In light of her own inadequacies in literacy, she pushed Lisa to learn as much as she could and to become adept in handling the family's printed material. Lisa's ability to handle the family's print became her "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) that she was able to draw upon in completing school related tasks.

Like the grandparents in Durkin's (1984) study, Mrs. Brooks (Drecus's grandmother) valued and enjoyed reading. She viewed her role as one of passing her literacy on to another generation. As a child, she had learned to love reading and viewed reading as another way of experiencing the worlds of other people. Success in reading had also been critical in her own career aspirations as she moved to different levels of nursing. Her own personal success was proof that reading and perseverance could and would make a difference in one's life. She made the effort and necessary sacrifices in order to help him learn to read. She encouraged Drecus to become a good reader because she saw reading success as a way for him to achieve his goals and become a productive citizen in this society. As a result of her efforts, Drecus began to see reading as a bridge to his academic success.

Snow et al. (1993) found that outside activities also positively influenced a child's reading achievement. That proved true for this family. Mrs. Brooks made sure that Drecus was exposed to and visited places "where he could learn something." It was her hope that those experiences would enhance his reading. Drecus also participated in sports and he recognized the reading benefit gained from his participation.

While all of the families had a central figure who valued literacy, each valued literacy for individual reasons. Their reasons were as unique as the persons possessing and expressing them and were representative of the distinctiveness of each family's literacy history. These findings corroborate the findings in the literature. Parents in a number of studies (Baumann & Thomas, 1997;Clark, 1983; Edwards, 1989; Teale, 1986)have been found to value

literacy for their children. They too wanted a better and brighter future for their children. Although each parent valued literacy, their perceptions of themselves (Teale, 1986) with regard to literacy made the difference in how they promoted literacy in their children.

Child/family overcame obstacles. This category represents examples of situations that would place the child at risk of not becoming a successful reader that either the child or the family worked to overcome. Snow et al. (1993) found that for the families in their study, there was a certain amount of resiliency in how the individual families managed the stresses in their daily lives. These stresses were problems and obstacles that the families faced as they attempted to carry out their daily activities. The family's resiliency or ability to bounce back from a troubling ordeal affected how they handled other issues such as education. The more resilient a family was, the more the family as a unit was able to focus on other issues.

While we know that low income and race are often obstacle for families to overcome and we know that all of the participants in this study were African American and from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, race and socioeconomic status were couched within the framework of even bigger issues for some of the families. How those families chose to deal with the obstacles that they faced was based on how they viewed the possibilities for their lives in the larger society. Each obstacle was different. These families faced obstacles that they worked and continued to work to overcome throughout this study.

The Bryant/Johnson/Brooks family had many obstacles to overcome. Drecus was a foster child because of the life that his natural parents chose to lead. Their problems with substance abuse had cost the loss of one parent in death, the loss of the other one to drug abuse and incarceration, and the loss of a stable home life for Drecus and his siblings. Because of that instability, Drecus, initially resented the structure that his grandmother, Mrs. Brooks, tried to bring to his life. While recognizing that resentment and the inability to sit still and focus, Mrs. Brooks worked hard with Drecus anyway to help him learn to read and begin to see the value in reading. Drecus had his own personal emotional issues that he was working to overcome. Although he attended a behavior disorder class on a daily basis, he still struggled with his emotions. During the second interview with Mrs. Brooks, she talked about how his emotions continued to fluctuate. Still, in light of all of that, Drecus continued to find success and pleasure in reading.

The Coleman family worked to help Lisa become literate because Ms. Coleman was illiterate. While Ms. Coleman was not a reader, that fact did not stand in the way of Lisa's literacy development. In fact, it was that lack of literacy that motivated Ms. Coleman to push Lisa to learn how to read and handle the daily affairs of the home. While most studies focus on the parent-child interactions with the parent reading to the child, Ms. Coleman, while unable to read to her child, was able to produce a literate child who spent time reading to her mother.

The families presented here were resilient (Snow et al., 1993). They were able to handle the difficult and sometimes tragic issues of their lives and move on. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) found that the low-income families in their study were able to continue to focus on helping their children with reading and other school work while balancing a myriad of personal crises. Like the families in the Snow study, financial stress was not a major issue related to the children's literacy development. Clark (1983) concluded that the families of high achievers were optimistic about the future and were able to cope with the daily challenges of life.

Reading goals related to career aspirations. This category represented comments that were related to job or career goals that the families had for their children. Any comments that signaled a hope for a better life through literacy achievement were noted and placed in this category. These parents and children expressed a desire that the child would attend college and go into professions such as teaching, medicine, and law.

These families had high aspirations for their children and stated them. They felt that because their children were successful readers, there was no limit to what they would be able to accomplish in terms of a job or career. While Lisa Coleman aspired to become a librarian, her mother thought she might become a pediatrician. When speaking of careers for Drecus, both Ms. Bryant and Ms. Brooks thought that Drecus could become a judge or a lawyer if he continued to work hard with reading and school in general. Ms. Bryant believed that he could get a good job and would not have to work in a factory or manufacturing plant.

The families wanted their children to do better in terms of a job or career than they had done, which according to Gadsen (1996) is characteristic of African-American families. Like Clark (1983), Gadsen suggested that the difference between high achievers and low achievers was found in their ability to translate their aspirations into reality. Shields, Gordon, & Dupree (1983) concluded that parenting practices account for the successes of the children.

Limitations

Five issues were observed as limitations to this study. Those limitations include both personal and professional concerns and are explicated in the following section.

Phenomenology was the theoretical perspective for this study. Phenomenology seeks to find the essence of an experience for the unique individual (in this case the family). It means using the individual's world view to explain the phenomenon instead of what I as the researcher expected the person to say. In Hycner's (1985) terms, it meant bracketing or suspending my beliefs as the phenomenon unfolded. While my biases were presented earlier in this dissertation, it was impossible for me to write any of this dissertation without regard for my own personal history. Alvermann (1996) wrote that the writer can never completely separate her personal experiences from the experiences of those about whom she writes. That was true in this study. My personal history as an African-American female from an economically disadvantaged background colored the lens through which I viewed the data. Having lived a similar experience affected my view. Some of my personal assumptions and biases were evident at the outset of the study as can be seen in the nature of the questions contained in the interview guides. My personal biases served as a limitation to this study.

It could also be argued that my personal history served as a strength to this study. Because I am African American and so were all of the participants, gaining access to their homes and into most of their lives was made easier. Once I shared the fact with each of them that I am a single mother, they relaxed and were eager to help me with they study. One mother said, "I just want to see you finish. I want any single parent to make it." A non-African-American researcher or an African-American researcher with a more affluent background would probably have obtained different results. That common ground that I shared with the participants would not have existed.

A third limitation was that only African-American families were interviewed. While a large portion of economically disadvantaged families in this country are racial minorities, only African-American families are represented in this study. That was due in large part to the racial makeup of the schools that the students attended.

The small number of participants is a fourth limitation of this study. The resulting conclusions are limited to the perspectives of those families that participated in this study and are not generalizable to other populations. While a case study design offered depth to the study, breadth was limited because of the small number.

A fifth and final limitation to this study was my inexperience as an interviewer. Although throughout many of the interviews, there was a mention of a person outside of the family who interacted with the child in a positive way, that person was not interviewed to see if there was a possibility that he had contributed to the child's literacy development. Perhaps, interviewing those somewhat significant others would have produced an even richer picture of the child's literacy development. While progressive optimism and high literacy press were key factors in the reading successes of the children, they represented contributing constructs to the entire development of the children. There may have been other factors that also played an essential role in their literacy development.

The method of questioning during the interviews was also seen as a limitation. In some cases, I should have probed more for in-depth responses with the children and parents. At other times, the responses should have determined the next question instead of the interview guide. In terms of gathering responses to my interview questions, the use of the tape recorder during the first interviews with the parents and caregivers served as an inhibitor to their candidness. Parents and caregivers did not respond as freely during the first interviews as they did during the second interviews when the tape recorder was not used.

Conclusions

I began this investigation in efforts to ascertain what we can learn from economically disadvantaged families whose children are successful readers. Within that framework, I also wanted to know what individuals, resources, and values would be pertinent as contributions to the literacy development of the child. In efforts to garner that information, I sought the individual perspectives of the families and let them tell their own stories about how the child had become a successful reader. Their views were critical to understanding literacy for their children.

While a major finding was that there must be an adult caregiver who values literacy, that was not enough. The caregiver must value literacy to a point whereby she feels compelled to do something to help the child become successful in reading. Doing something may not always mean "marinating the children with literature so that they're dripping with print" (Edwards, 1995), but it may mean providing a supportive and encouraging atmosphere whereby the child can become successful in reading. Although the literature would suggest that a caregiver be a literate individual in order for the child to succeed in reading, that was not the case for the Coleman family in this study. There is evidence that a child can become a successful reader even when the parent is a non-reader. The difference for the Coleman family, however, was that Ms. Coleman recognized her lack of literacy skills, and

pressed for her daughter to obtain them. For Ms. Coleman, doing something meant pushing her daughter and learning from her as they shared responsibilities for their household.

Doing something with regards to reading translates into a high literacy press. A high literacy press fueled by progressive optimism did exist for all of these families. One goal that all expressed concern about was the futures that their children would live in this society. While their push for literacy was in the present, their scope was futuristic. Each family viewed literacy as a way for their children to be able to obtain college educations and move on to careers that would change their lives forever. They pressed toward literacy. For those families in which the children read for pleasure, the children had already learned to transfer reading to other facets of their lives and had become successful in those areas as well.

This press for literacy is rooted in African-American history. Frederick Douglass (1968) pressed for literacy as he tricked the children of his slave masters into teaching him how to read using Webster's Elementary Spelling Book (1908). His new found ability was later shared with fellow slaves who wanted to learn how to read. Douglass believed that in order for him to change the direction of his future, he had to learn how to read.

Gadsen (1995) quoted African Americans at various stages in American history over a period of approximately 150 years as they voiced their desires for their children to become literate and make better progress than the generation before them. Because of their desires for their offspring, they pressed toward literacy and literate activities.

Billingsley (1992) found similar aspirations for the African-American families he studied and examined their struggles to achieve success in this country. In describing the African-American families he studied, Billingsley focused on their abilities to endure in spite of the oppression they encountered on a daily basis.

The strengths of the families in this study were also evident in their abilities to overcome the obstacles they faced daily. They were able to persevere and still focus on literacy as a goal for their children. Because they were able to focus on reading success as a goal for their children, they created literacy milieus through which the children were able to obtain the necessary attitude and skills to propel them to success in reading.

Pleasure gained from reading and sharing reading were other strengths of these children and families. Both activities provided the children with entertainment and practice which perpetuates their experienced success in reading.

The more they read, whether for pleasure or for the purposes of sharing, the better they became as readers themselves. In the process of enjoying and helping others, they helped themselves too.

Implications

For the Practitioner

The implications from this study suggest the following for teachers: (1) there is no identified set of conditions that must be met in order for a child to become a successful reader, (2) the support given by a caregiver is important, but may not always be traditional, (3) shared reading is a natural for these students.

Teachers should be aware of the fact that in order for a child to become a successful reader, there is no prescribed set of conditions that must exist. Family conditions and situations vary and are as individual and unique as the individual genetic makeup. Obstacles that families face and the way in which the families respond to these situations also vary. Teachers can be encouraged to look beyond the surface issues of poverty and race as prohibitors to literacy success and focus instead on offering support for the child and the family in terms of literacy needs. The support and encouragement initially offered by the teacher is often reciprocated as support for the teacher's classroom program and reading success for the child.

The support given by a caregiver is important. That support may not always be what teachers traditionally have in mind as support. For some families, it may be encouraging the child to do well in school with verbal praise. For others, it may be making the child read the captions at the bottom of the television screen. Still, for others, it may be giving the child added household responsibilities that force the child to deal with print. Teachers can look for other types of support for reading simply by looking beyond the traditional reading activities. They can use and capitalize on the skills and knowledge that the children bring to school.

Teachers can also reach out to parents and solicit their support for their reading programs. Once parents are made aware of a teacher's concerns about their children, they can be given the opportunity to take part in alleviating those concerns.

For the Researcher

One of the disturbing facts related to this study was that of the six students who were reading on or above grade level, only one student was making the honor roll at school. Further investigations need to examine why students who are successful readers and generally like school often do not achieve at school at a rate that is

commensurate with their abilities. An examination of classroom practices and student behaviors might yield more information about the student's perceptions of classroom requirements.

An investigation simply of non-traditional literacy activities that families include in the literacy development of their children would help to inform the field of reading. Often these activities are overlooked as researchers attempt to determine the literacy practices of the home. When investigating home literacy practices, families from a variety of cultures and backgrounds have their practices compared to those practices that are considered to be traditional reading practices. Many times when the traditional practices are not observed, a deficit is noted instead of the differences. Non-traditional practices are different by their nature, but not necessarily deficient in quality or influence in the literacy development of the child.

Further investigations could also examine why sharing reading is so important to students at this age. Finding out whether their ideas about sharing reading is age related or related to the situation would help explain their reasons for wanting to help others with reading.

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